

Stendhal (Henri Beyle)

to Comtesse

Clementine Curial

Love letters are virtually the only "public" space in which it is permissible for us to explore our deepest self, excavate our feelings, and express our most private emotions. Writing such letters, we often come to appreciate our own complexities and understand that the real purpose of writing letters is to fall a little bit in love with our self. In this process, the actual Beloved is mostly an innocent bystander.

Nowhere is this more apparent (comically so) than in the "Dear John" letter that Stendhal wrote to himself on June 24, 1824. Dissatisfied with his lover's reticence, he penned a "My dear Henri" letter that does everything that the perfect Dear John should do: it takes the blame for the end of love, it praises the Beloved, it promises tender interest until the end of one's life, it hints that the Beloved was the best thing that ever happened to one, it offers (of course!) friendship. Ah, yes, friendship. If love is self-love, the function of a Dear John is to help the Beloved preserve self-love even after the magic potion of passion has been withdrawn.

Had Stendhal really believed his passionate affair with Comtesse Clementine Curial was over, he never could have written such a letter. This letter borders on parody with its formulaic presentation of all of the requisite features of a Dear John. (No one who has ever been decimated by a Dear John/Dear Jane has paused to consider the letter's generic requirements.) Stendhal's affair with Comtesse Curial lasted another two years. When it did end, there was no room for humor.

Clementine Curial was married to a cruel and abusive man fourteen years her senior when she met Stendhal in 1824. They fell almost immediately and passionately into love, so much so that they forgot all caution. Once, she even hid him in her cellar for several days in order that they could be together whenever her jealous husband left the house. She was consumed by love for Stendhal, yet unable to leave her husband. She was a mother at a time when law allowed a father full control over his children, especially in the case of separation or divorce. Torn between desire and the reality of her situation, Curial

attempted suicide in 1826. When that failed, she made a final break from Stendhal, unable to continue a love that brought so much pain.

The real end of the relationship (unlike this feigned Dear John) left Stendhal in a depression that felt like living death. He recovered, true to form, by writing. In *Promenades dans Rome* he was able to reminisce about happier times spent in Italy and soothe himself with the tame pleasures of research. Carefully, even tenderly, he wrote himself into life and self-love once more.

Paris, the 24th of June 1824, at noon

You can have no notion of the black thoughts into which your silence has plunged me. I was thinking that yesterday night, when you were packing, you might have found the time to write me three lines, which you could have put into the box at Laon. When no letter came yesterday, I hoped for one this morning. "Whilst changing horses at S——," I said to myself, "she will have asked for a sheet of paper." But no: occupied solely with her daughter, she forgets the being who can no longer think of anything but her!

As I pondered at my desk, with the shutters closed, my black grief found entertainment in composing the following letter which you will perhaps write to me before long—for, after all, what would it cost you to write me a few words? Here, then, is the letter which I shall have the sorrow to read:

"My dear Henri, you exacted from me a promise to be sincere. This opening to my letter already enables you to foretell what remains to be said. Do not take it too greatly to heart, my dear friend. Bear in mind that, in default of keener sentiments, I shall always be bound to you by the sincerest friendship, and shall always take the tenderest interest in whatever may befall you. You realise, my dear friend, from the tone of this letter that a very sincere trust in you has taken that place in my heart which was formerly occupied by feelings of another sort. I like to believe that this trust will be justified, and that I shall never have to repent what I have been to you.

"Farewell, my dear friend, let us both be reasonable.

Accept the friendship, the tender friendship, that I offer you, and do not fail to come and see me when I return to Paris.

"Farewell, my friend . . ."